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ABSTRACT

The decade of the 1980's has seen the beginning of a great debate over the federal government's involvement in the nation's schools. The history of one program, the Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA), sheds light on how the Reagan Administration has entered that debate. Congress created WEEA to help schools and colleges educate females for full participation in modern life. In 1981 the Reagan administration indicated that it was opposed to federal money being used to bring about social change. This shift in philosophy became particularly evident in Department of Education policies. In March 1981 Reagan asked Congress to eliminate the WEEA program. Bipartisan support for the program in Congress prevented this action. In 1982 the Department of Education's "Field Reader Outreach Program" became a primary vehicle for shifting the emphasis of federal funding away from equity efforts. This program proposed to select grant proposal readers from among non-experts. Also in 1982 the WEEA program director was temporarily removed and an advisory council director was fired. What has happened and will happen to WEEA is a microcosm of what is happening to women's rights in general and in education specifically under the Reagan administration. (LP)

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Summer 1983

A Clash of Ideologies: *The Reagan Administration Versus the Women's Educational Equity Act*

By Theresa Cusick

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Congress hereby finds and declares that educational programs in the United States are frequently inequitable . . . and frequently limit the full participation of all individuals in American society.

It is the purpose of this part to provide educational equity for women in the United States.

—The Women's Educational Equity Act of 1978.

The decade of the 1980s has seen the beginning of a great debate over the federal government's involvement in our nation's schools. The debate has grown and waged and will continue to wage over the size, scope and power of the federal government. In the process, many worthwhile and beneficial federal programs and initiatives have been lost. But looking beneath the surface, there is another, perhaps more insidious, question in this debate: should the federal government continue to play a key role in ensuring that all Americans have equal access to quality education? More specifically, should the federal government actively work to ensure that girls and women have such access?

The history of one small program, the Women's Educational Equity Act, should shed some light on how the Reagan Administration has entered that debate. The treatment of this one program reveals a grim pattern that threads throughout the current administration. It is a pattern that can be seen in the weakening of key laws protecting the rights of women and girls in education and in diminishing support for the very concept of programs aimed at promoting equal access.

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Setting the Stage

Congress created the Women's Educational Equity Act Program to help schools and colleges educate women and girls to participate fully in modern life. For most women, this full participation includes being part of the paid labor force, for at least a portion of their lives. The goals of this program could aptly be described as being solidly in the mainstream of American mores. Yet in the space of two years, this relatively obscure program, with a budget that has never topped $10 million, has been thrust into the center of an ideological debate.

Ronald Reagan's "Program for Economic Recovery," first unveiled before a joint session of Congress in February 1981, signalled a major shift in the federal government's priorities. Reagan's statement that federal money should not be used to "bring about social change," put Americans on notice that efforts at social reform would be among the first casualties in the move to reduce the size and power of the federal government.

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Educational Equity or Educational Quality

Nowhere was this shift in priorities more evident than in the Department of Education—an agency Reagan had pledged to abolish. Secretary of Education Terrel Bell remarked in August 1981 to a group of state education leaders that "in our great scramble to provide equal opportunity and access in education we have witnessed a general decline in the literacy and academic competence of our students." Operating on the premise that federal equity programs had not only failed to achieve their goals but had actually contributed to the general malaise in public education, incoming Department of Education officials seemed ready to reject equity as a legitimate purpose of federal funding.

Although one of a score of targeted programs, the Women's Educational Equity Act, by its very name and nature, was extremely visible. In fact, prior to Reagan's inauguration, the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, had identified WEEA in their report, *Mandate for Leadership*, as a "top priority item for the feminist network" and "an important resource for the practice of feminist policies and politics." As such, the foundation urged that its programs "be given immediate scrutiny" and its budget "drastically cut."

The Heritage Foundation's message to the incoming president was clear: feminism in itself was suspect. A program that encouraged new roles and wider options for women—even though that was the express purpose of the enacting legislation—was unacceptable in a conservative administration.

This distrust of feminist goals and principles marked a departure not only from the previous Democratic administration's policies, but from traditional Republican ideology as well. WEEA was enacted during a Republican administration in 1974 and since then has enjoyed support from both parties. Indeed, many of the model projects and materials funded through WEEA address pressing social and economic needs that both parties have identified as priorities. These programs include addressing the special problems of minority and disabled women and those aimed at increasing the participation of women in technical and scientific fields.

Zeroing in on WEEA

However, the history of the Women's Educational Equity Act since November 1980 indicates that President Reagan shared the philosophy articulated in the Heritage Foundation's report. In March 1981, Reagan asked Congress to eliminate the program by folding it into an education block grant. Bipartisan supporters in Congress—including the unlikely combination of Republicans Bobbi Fiedler and the late John Ashbrook and Democrats Ted Kennedy and George Miller—banded together to save the program. Since then, although the law remains on the books, the Reagan Administration has pressed Congress to withhold funding for the program. To date, Congress has refused.

Unsuccessful in its legislative maneuvers to eliminate the program, the self-proclaimed conservative administration found itself in the uncomfortable position of harboring a feminist program. In April 1982, the publication of a *Conservative Digest* article sparked efforts to tone down or eliminate the WEEA program's feminist goals. The WEEA program, under the direction of Dr. Leslie Wolfe, was attacked for being a "money machine for a network of openly radical feminist groups." In fact, a study conducted in September 1982 for the Reagan-appointed National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs found that the lion's share—38 percent—of WEEA funding has gone to post-secondary institutions and only 16 percent has gone to any women's organizations, much less "radical feminist" ones.

The 1982 Grant Review Process

The Department of Education's "Field Reader Outreach Program," launched in Febraury 1982, became the primary vehicle for shifting the emphasis of federal funding away from equity efforts. Publicly, the department insisted that the purpose was mainly to "broaden our field reader base," as Education Comptroller Ralph Olmo explained in a February 5, 1982 memo. With top Education officials, like the Rev. Robert Billings (formerly the executive director of the Moral Majority, Inc.) coordinating recruitment, and Charles Heatherly (the editor of the same Heritage Foundation report that had targeted WEEA) heading the program, suspicions quickly emerged about the Education Department's true agenda.

Public outcry was fierce. One long time Education staffer voiced a common opinion when he called the 1982 peer review process a "travesty." There has never "been ideological criteria" for selecting readers "applied in the past," he said. Republican members of Congress Lawrence DeNardis and James Jeffords were moved to write Secretary of Education Bell in June 1982 that they had become "increasingly concerned about reports of what appear to be sudden and major changes in the administration of the Women's Educational Equity Act . . . ."

The furor over the reviewer selection process stems from the key roles these "non-federal" or "outside" readers play in selecting grant applications for funding. Federal managers responsible for making the final selections weigh the judgments of these readers very heavily when making their choices.

As a rule, readers are selected based on their knowledge or expertise in the field they are reviewing. Many programs like WEEA have written criteria for choosing readers. WEEA's top criteria are "commitment to the provision of educational equity for women and girls and knowledge and experience in issues relating to educational equity" and "expertise in one or more WEEA priority areas."

In 1982, the selection of readers was taken out of the hands of the WEEA program staff and turned over to the "Field Reader Outreach" program. There is little evidence that any attempt was made to match the qualifications of the readers to the needs and goals of WEEA. For example, of the 50 readers who were invited to read and rank

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proposals, 25 had been previously rejected by the WEEA staff as being unqualified. Another 13 had never been seen by the staff.

The lead sentence in a May 20, 1982 article in the *Tulsa World* newspaper reveals much about one reader's attitude toward WEEA and the review process. "The Oklahoma Republican National Committeewoman who opposes ERA but supports 'Equal Rights' was brought to Washington for a week to help check a controversial feminist agency which the Reagan Administration wants to abolish."

If Grace Bulton, the "Oklahoman" in the *Tulsa World* article, typifies these readers, it would appear that they viewed their job as checking up on the WEEA program, not evaluating proposals. In fact many of the readers who finally arrived in Washington in May 1982 had credentials that cast doubt on their ability to objectively evaluate WEEA grant applications. Some were affiliated with organizations like Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum—an organization that has professed ideologies totally incompatible with WEEA's goals. One of the readers on minority women's issues was a professor from Bob Jones University, an institution noted for its racially discriminatory policies. Many had no background in education or women's issues. Many listed Republican party activities as qualifications.

These reviewers tended to give lower ratings to proposals which presented philosophies different from their own, making them less likely to get funded. In any event, a sprinkling of comments and criticisms gleaned from some of the readers points out how widely their views diverged from the purpose of the act.

- Do not see the need in project. Most girls and boys go into field because it is way parents bring them up and mostly they are born with certain desires . . . just don't agree with whole approach.
- It is good to present careers to both men and women so they have an opportunity to decide on what field to go into but aren't we swaying them somewhat . . . to take a non-traditional field?
- The title of the program concerns me and encourages women not to stay in low paying jobs but to move up if they desire.

The WEEA Program Director is Temporarily Removed

Dr. Leslie Wolfe, the director of WEEA, played no part in final selection of field readers, as she would have in previous years. She wasn't there. Nor was she present during the actual proposal evaluation sessions or during the development of a slate of new grants.

The same *Conservative Digest* article that labelled the WEEA program a "money machine," called Wolfe a "monarch in the feudal Washington Bureaucracy, imperiously guarding her fiefdom." It went on to urge her "swift dethronement."

On April 26, on the heels of the *Digest* article, Wolfe unwillingly began a 90-day temporary reassignment to the Office of Management in the Education Department. Lawrence Davenport explained to a Senate panel during his confirmation proceedings for the post of Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education that Wolfe's transfer was "occasioned by a management need in another part of the Department of Education."

An April 19 memo to Charles Heatherly contradicts that explanation. It indicates that the Department deliberately planned to get her out of the way during this time period. The memo lists three possible 90-120 day assignments for Dr. Wolfe in "response to a request from Ralph Olmo," Comptroller of the Department of Educaiton. She began working on the third option, detail to task force on "internal control systems" a few days after the deadline for new grant applications had passed.

An Advisory Council Director Fired

On the same day that Wolfe was beginning her new duties in the Office of Management, Rosemary Thomson was in front of a Congressional panel urging Congress to end federal funding for WEEA. "I respectfully ask you to immediately discontinue appropriations—certainly for FY 1983. It would be a painless way to cut the budget's 'fat' while helping reduce the overwhelming deficit."

Thomson was soon to figure prominently in what Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) would graphically term a "purge" of the National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Programs (NACWEP).

NACWEP was established by the Women's Educational Equity Act to make policy recommendations on programs affecting women's educational equity—including WEEA itself. While NACWEP plays no role in selecting WEEA proposals for funding and cannot determine the level of WEEA appropriations, in the past it has served as a voice for women from within the government.

The 20-member council is appointed by the President but historically has retained some measure of independence. During the Ford and Carter Administrations the council was bipartisan.

The Reagan-appointed council embarked on a course of action in July 1982 that would shatter this tradition of independence. In a series of rapid actions, July 19 and 20, newly sworn-in members of NACWEP fired its long-time executive director, Joy Simonson, and replaced her with Rosemary Thomson—a prominent member of Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum. The Eagle Forum rejects many of the principles associated with women's rights. It takes credit for the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, for example. Thomson herself has minimal education experience and none in equity.

First, the Council amended its personnel policy so that it could fire employees without notice. Then, it voted 13-4 to fire Joy Simonson, the executive director.

With the guidance of the White House, the Council worked quickly to hire her replacement. That afternoon, while a formal agenda proceeded in one room a five-member search committee—chaired by Eagle Forum member Judith Moss—interviewed applicants in the next.

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One candidate appeared at the NACWEP office before the vote to fire Simonson had taken place and told the staff that Wendy Borcherdt, the White House liaison on women's issues, had sent her there to be interviewed for the position. Five others arrived from the White House on a prearranged schedule. At least two of the six candidates—including Thomson herself—were from out of town.

Betty Cordoba, the new "chairman" of the Council readily admits to the view that the Council must adhere closely to the Reagan Administration's policies. "We are Reagan appointees," she said during the Council's second meeting in September 1982. "We always have to maintain the Reagan philosophy . . . ."

Looking to the Future

Columnist Judy Mann summed up the views of many observers of WEEA and NACWEP in July of 1982: "Leaders of organizations that have worked to promote equity for women in education see this as nothing less than putting the fox in charge of the chicken coop."

The events of 1982 will set the stage for the next few years. Advocates for women will struggle to keep the program viable and true to its mandate. Self-styled antifeminists within and outside the Reagan Administration will strive to defund it and undercut it. The lines are drawn.

What happened and what is still happening to the Women's Educational Equity Act is a microcosm of what is happening to women's rights in education, and indeed to women's rights in general during the Reagan Administration. The battle over WEEA is a battle over conflicting ideas. WEEA has gained a symbolic importance far beyond its very real benefits. As long as the program and its equity goals remain intact, a voice for women and the full participation in modern life remains also.

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